**3.4 Audio activity**

Using audio is a very idiosyncratic practice amongst [Open University](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/glossary/showentry.php?courseid=2837&concept=Open+University) students. Some listen to them in the car, others on a personal stereo on the train, some while washing up, others at their desk. Flexibility of use is certainly one of their virtues. However you use them, some of the following may be useful guidelines.

* Read the notes for the activity before you listen. At the very least try and fix in your head or note down the main purpose of the audio and listen out for the key questions of the unit.
* If you can, have a pen and paper handy for short notes.
* Audio can be stopped and replayed – when something is complex or interesting. It can also be fast-forwarded.
* After listening to the audio – and this is really the most important thing – spend five minutes organising your notes and thoughts. What are the key points, new ideas, new connections sparked by the audio? Is there anything you need to look up or check over? If you can’t do it now, make a note to do it later.

**Listening to audio files**

**Participants: Dr Kath Woodward, Dr Karim Murji and Professor Wendy Hollway.**

While listening to the audio files below you will hear a discussion of the key questions posed about identity in this unit.

* How are identities formed?
* How much protocol do we have over shaping our identities?
* Are there any particular uncertainties about identity in contemporary life?

**Key points**

The key points discussed are:

* Changing times have led to particular interest in matters of identity.
* Migration and movement mean identities are changing and people's sense of who they are and where they belong becomes more important.
* There may be greater uncertainty about identity now than in the past.
* Identity involves links between the personal, how we see ourselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, and the social, how others see us and the structures that make up the society in which we live.
* Identity is marked by differences, including how we look, such as the clothes we wear, and how we sound, such as language and accent.
* Identity requires some personal engagement on our part; we have to take up identities for ourselves.
* We are constrained by others' perception of us and by the societies in which we live, but we are also able to effect changes, for example through collective action.

**Before listening**

Think about these questions:

* What is identity?
* How are identities formed and what processes are involved?
* Do we have multiple identities?
* What sort of changes are there in the contemporary world and how might they impact upon our identities?
* How might uncertainties create new opportunities for shaping our identities as well as insecurities?
* Do we shape our own identities?
* What sort of constraints are there and which structures might influence the identities we have?

**After listening**

Make some brief notes in response to the questions above and think about how the discussion in the audio files has illustrated some of the ways in which identities are formed. People both make individual and collective investment in identity positions and are themselves categorised as having particular identities, sometimes not of their own choice, such as through census categories or ethnicised or racialised stereotypes. Structures can be changed through agency, although there are constraints at some times and in some situations which make this very difficult. In the discussion Karim Murji, as a sociologist, cites examples of 'outside' structures in the personal–social interrelationship, whereas Wendy Hollway, as a psychologist, places more emphasis on personal, 'inside' dimensions, including conscious and unconscious forces influencing individuals' experience and sense of who they are. Identity is not always apparent or transparent and we may not always be fully aware of our different identities or of why we have taken up these positions.

An investigation into identity, especially in changing times, raises issues about different relationships and tensions between the personal and the social, structure and agency, conscious and unconscious factors and between sameness and difference. Whilst structures may be very influential in shaping our identities there are always uncertainties and changes which often take place through agency, either that of individuals or collectively through groups of people. Uncertainties can lead to confusion, but change can also create diversity and new opportunities for us to shape our identities. Identity is a dynamic concept that has considerable significance within the social sciences and in our everyday lives.